

Robert Browning: 'My Last Duchess'

About the poet

Robert Browning (1812-89) was, with Alfred Lord Tennyson, one of the two most celebrated of Victorian poets. His father was a bank clerk, and Browning educated himself by reading in the family library. He published many verse dramas and dramatic monologues (poems, like 'My Last Duchess', in which a single character speaks to the reader), notably in the collections *Men and Women* (1855) and *Dramatis Personae* (1864). His greatest success came in 1868 with *The Ring and the Book* – a verse narrative in twelve books, spoken by a range of different characters. In her lifetime his wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-61) was more famous. She was a semi-invalid, following an accident in her teens. In 1846 she and Robert ran away from her father (who tried to control her) and eloped to Italy.

About the poem

This poem was published in *Dramatic Lyrics* in 1842 (the same year as Tennyson's *Ulysses*). The poem reflects Browning's interest in Italian politics of the late Middle Ages (the time known as the Renaissance). The poem appears as one half of a conversation. The speaker is the unnamed Duke of Ferrara, a city-state in Lombardy (now the north of Italy – but Italy as a unified state was created only in the 19th century, long after Browning wrote this poem. In the Middle Ages each city, with the surrounding country, was an independent realm with its own ruler). The listener is an envoy (a kind of diplomat and messenger). His master, a count, has sent him to negotiate the dowry for the marriage of his (the count's) daughter to the duke, whose 'last duchess' is the subject of his speech – and of the poem. While having her portrait painted, the duchess revealed innocent qualities that irritated the duke so far that he chose to have her killed. His power is absolute and she is easily replaced. But the portrait, by a master painter, is of far more value to the duke and he is pleased to show this off to his distinguished visitor. The critic Isobel Armstrong sums up the poem like this:

'The mad duke ... cannot love without so possessing and destroying the identity of his wife that he literally kills her and lives with her dead substitute, a work of art.'

Her reading may be right – but are we sure the duke is mad? Perhaps he is sane but very cruel and ruthless. The duke names two artists – both imaginary. They are the painter Frà (Brother) Pandolf and the sculptor Claus of Innsbruck. The poem may draw on a literary tradition of despotic Italians (as we find in John Webster's play, *The Duchess of Malfi* or John Keats' poem, 'Isabella'). But it is not so improbable – Dante, in the *Inferno* (Hell) recalls various true stories about Italian nobles which match or surpass (outdo) this for cruelty.

The poem in detail

Browning opens with the Duke's words to his guest. He explains why he has named the painter, and that the portrait is kept behind a curtain which he alone is permitted to draw back. And when he does this, he notes how the viewer is curious but perhaps frightened to ask about the thing that puzzles him. We see that this visitor is not the first to 'ask' in this way.

So what is it that the viewer sees? It is a 'spot of joy' in the cheek of the duchess. The duke tries to imagine what the painter said that would cause this slight reaction. The duke does not object to the artist's showing such courtesy. But he thinks his wife should be more dignified – and not so easily 'impressed'. Specifically he faults her for finding equal pleasure in four things – as if they are not at all of equal value.

These are:

- his 'favour at her breast' – either a reference to their love-making or merely to the duke's approval of her appearance
- the sun setting
- a gift of fruit from an unnamed courtier
- the white mule she rode.

The duke accepts that it was good for her to show gratitude, but bad that she ranked 'anybody's gift' with his giving her his family name (nine hundred years old).

The duke considers the possibility of explaining to her why she was wrong. He notes that he lacks the 'skill in speech' to make his will 'quite clear to such an one'. But anyway, he would not try even if he had the skill, because this would be a loss of dignity – 'some stooping'. And he chooses 'never to stoop'. Instead he let her carry on for a while – 'this grew' – then 'gave commands'. We are not told what the commands were but can work them out from the result. This appears in three things:

- the statement that all smiles stopped – this may at first seem ambiguous, and we think it is because she had reason to be serious or unhappy. Then we realise that the duke means that all smiles and everything else stopped for the duchess
- the repeated statement that the duchess, in the painting 'stands / As if alive' – but she isn't
- the sequel – the duke needs or wants a wife, and is arranging his next marriage. He praises the Count's known generosity while stressing that it is the wife, rather than the dowry, that he really wants.

The poem's ending recalls its beginning – as the duke points out another treasure. A bronze sculpture of Neptune (the Roman god of the sea, called Poseidon by the Greeks) taming a sea-horse. This is like the start of the poem. But it is also quite unlike it – Frà Pandolf's masterpiece is a portrait of a real person, to whom the duke was married – yet she is never named, only identified by her relation to the duke. Claus's bronze is of a fantastic, remote and mythical subject. Yet to the duke they may seem of equal value, since he mentions them in the same breath.

The poet's method

This is an amazingly skilful poem – there is one speaker, yet we learn about four characters:

- the duke
- the duchess
- the visitor (the count's envoy)
- the painter, Frà Pandolf.

One of the reasons why Browning likes the monologue as a form so much, is that he is able to exploit the gap between what the speaker (within the poem) wants us to know, and what the poet (standing outside the poem) allows us to read between the lines. What things do we (as readers) learn here, that the duke does not mean to tell his visitor?

In one way the piece is very unlike most lyric poetry – there are no notable metaphors or similes. All the images are of things that are literally present, or that the duke recalls from his memory of the past. Check this for yourself.

The poem is very conventional in form – it uses the line that Shakespeare relies on for most of the dialogue in his plays (the technical name is the iambic pentameter – as it has five [Latin penta] poetic 'feet', each of which has two syllables, of which the second [usually] is stressed). In this poem Browning arranges the lines in rhyming pairs, which we call 'couplets'. Like Shakespeare (and later writers such as Coleridge and Wordsworth), Browning makes the lines run on – or if you prefer he does not end stop them. The technical name for this is enjambement ('using the legs' in French). What does this mean, and why might Browning do it?

- What it means mainly is that most punctuation marks appear within the lines (not at the end) and most lines end without a punctuation mark.
- What it also means is that, when you read the poem (aloud or in your head) you should not stop at the end of a line, but should pause or stop at any punctuation mark.
- Browning does it because rhyming couplets that stopped at the end of each line would seem mechanical and not at all like real speech – and he wants the poem to sound natural. Of course, this is only a matter of feeling – if we look closely we will realise that even the cleverest speakers would not really be able to speak fluently in couplets.

Ambiguity and irony

This poem is one in which the relationship between appearance and reality is important – if you prefer, between what things seem to be and what they really are.

- On the surface it is an account of a polite negotiation between two noblemen, enlivened by the host's decision to show his privileged guest a masterpiece by a great portrait painter (something few visitors would be allowed to see: notice that the portrait is not in a public area but upstairs – at the end of the poem the duke speaks of going 'down'), and to recount something of its subject, his previous wife.

- Beneath the surface is a terrible story of ruthless and despotic power – of the duke's disapproval of the natural and innocent behaviour of his naïve wife, who does not know the value of his great name. We are less sure about the artist – does Frà Pandolf know, or care about, these things? And equally we are unsure how the listener, the duke's honoured guest, feels about what he hears.

Sometimes we find that the lines have more to say than at first appears – we call this ellipsis, when something is missed out. Look at the following examples from the poem, and say what you think they mean in full – if you like, fill in any blanks that Browning has left for the reader:

- 'Her looks went everywhere'
- 'I choose / Never to stoop'
- 'This grew'
- 'I gave commands'
- 'All smiles stopped together'

Pronouns, possessives and other forms of address

The only named characters in the poem are the two artists. The duchess and count are known only by their titles while the rest of the time, like the duke and his guest, they are identified by pronouns – look for the first person pronouns (I and me) for the duke, the second person (you) for the envoy, and the third-person (she and her) for the duchess. We also find the possessive 'my' occurring quite frequently.

Browning finds other ways to avoiding using names – to show the duchess's lack of dignity he calls her 'such an one', while his bride-to-be, mentioned well after her father, the count, is 'his fair daughter's self'. The envoy is 'sir' repeatedly and (polite) 'you', not intimate or familiar 'thou' and 'thee'. This is courteous but marks the listener as the duke's social inferior – to a more eminent man or an equal he would use some such form as 'your grace', 'your highness' or 'my lord'.

Ideas for studying the poem

Reading the poem

This poem is quite long and not very easy for reading when you first meet it. But you need to see it whole in order to get a sense of the narrative. Perhaps the best way is for a teacher (or any other good actor or reader) to present the poem in a complete reading – while students listen initially. (If you can't do this live, find a good recording online.) This could be repeated, perhaps allowing students to see the text. But they will need something to help them sort out what happens – either to make their own bullet points, or to arrange a series of statements about the poem into a sequence. You could take the same statements and organise them, for instance, in these differing ways:

- the order in which they appear in the poem
- the order in which they really happened
- their importance to the reader of the poem or the duke in the poem.

This is not a poem for students to approach for the first time in an exam – and it will be hard for some to keep a sense of what is going on in it. Many readers will have problems with the cultural setting, though readers from some ethnic groups will be familiar with the idea of arranged marriages and dowries.

Possessions and girl power

Remember that this poem is not a real historical record. Some Italian Renaissance rulers did have great power – but we also know of scheming and powerful women (such as the poisoner Lucrezia Borgia). Do you think the poem depicts a common or very unusual situation? Even today we talk of 'trophy wives', and we know of some men who want to show off portraits of their wives or girlfriends.

In the modern western world the law protects wives from such treatment, but both men and women have a way of getting rid of their partners through divorce.

The case against the duke

The duke never says openly or unambiguously that he killed his wife or ordered anyone else to kill her. Go through the poem and note down any clues to her fate. You may wish to put them under these different headings:

- what the duke and his servants did
- how he or they did it
- when and where this happened
- why it happened.

Alternatively one could write a psychological profile of the duke – perhaps trying to establish whether he is mad or bad, or both at once.

Frà Pandolf and the duchess

We have some hints as to the kind of thing the artist would say to the duchess – as a gallant compliment, or to put her at her ease. And we also know how (in the duke's eyes, anyway) his wife would react. The duke would not object to the artist's giving his wife compliments - he would not feel jealousy, so much as pride in another person's admiring his possession. (He would not feel jealousy because neither the artist nor the duchess would dare to do anything beyond courteous conversation.) Write out as a script for the stage or a film, radio or TV drama, one or more scenes based on the duchess's sitting for the artist – what things might they say to each other, and how?

Storyboarding and comic strips

This poem is very suitable for adapting into other forms. Without changing the text, it could be made into a comic strip or graphic novel. It could also be made into a short feature film or radio / TV play. In this case, one could use only the duke's speech, as a voiceover, or add other dialogue to this, as well as any sound effects and music.

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You could produce the script for this, or could combine it with work for speaking and listening, and present the play live or as a short film. This could be used as a teaching resource for students in future years.

The envoy's report to the count

When the visitor (the silent listener in the poem) returns to his master, the count, what will happen?

- Will the envoy (messenger) dare to tell the count everything?
- Even if he does, will the count care – will he be more eager for an alliance with a duke, than for his daughter's welfare?
- Will the count's daughter have a different character, so that she is able to avoid displeasing the duke and may be able to manipulate him?